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Humanitarian situation in East Timor

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The chaos produced by the activities of the pro-Indonesian militias and members of the police and armed forces has led to the looting, burning and destruction of hundreds of houses, the killing of hundreds of civilians as well as the displacement of thousands who have abandoned their homes to seek refuge in centres run by international, humanitarian and religious organisations.

Thousands of people are believed to be displaced within East Timor, in unidentified locations, perhaps in the mountains. It is estimated that approximately 1,300 people have sought refuge in the UNAMET compound in Dili, where the situation is worsening. Electricity was cut, the fuel needed to run the generators is becoming scarce, so is the water, and communication is only maintained thanks to their three satellite telephones. As a result, contacts with East Timor are limited to those calls that can be made using UNAMET and UNHCR's satellite telephones. All other means of communication have been suppressed and are under the control of the military.

In the last few days, numerous attacks with occasional backing from the police have produced new casualties among the civilian population sheltered in various centres, the destruction of such centres and the flight of their occupants, who are then forced to go to police compounds.

The police have also forced thousands of people to abandon the centres where they had sought refuge and where religious missions were taking care of them and to move to police compounds under the pretext that they are incapable of ensuring their protection.

According to the latest information, the compounds and training and education centres of religious organisations, as the Salesians compounds in Comoro, Fatumaca and Fuiloro have been totally destroyed. The priests, threatened by armed people, have been forced to pull out and flee to the jungle and hills. Eight nuns of the Canosian congregation have been killed in Baucau. Also Mg. do Nascimento, bishop of Baucau has been injured and fled to the hills.

Various sources indicate that the Indonesian police and military are massively and forcibly deporting people out of East Timor. If confirmed, this news will indicate a grave violation of human rights and international law. The result would be the creation of refugee camps, totally controlled by the pro-Indonesian militias and the military at a human cost difficult to ascertain. We have as a reference the Rwandan refugee camps created by the Hutu militias, the "*Interhamwe*", whose control of the population resulted in constant terror and the summary execution of those who wished to leave the camps.

Discussions about the organisation of humanitarian assistance are currently taking place in Geneva between UNHCR, OCHA and the Military Civil Defence Unit (MCDU), a body created recently and which has the logistical means and the expertise to carry out the supply of foodstuffs and essential relief items to the population in need. The establishment of a co-ordinating mechanism for humanitarian aid in East Timor is being studied as well.

The United Nations will most probably designate a person or a structure to assume this co-ordinating role within UNAMET. However, it will only start to function once the security conditions allow which is not the case at present.

Currently, the only active humanitarian presence still remaining in East Timor is that of a surgeon from MDM-F who refused to be evacuated and remains permanently in the Clinic Motael of the Catholic Church in Dili. Unfortunately, it is impossible to establish contact with him. All other members of humanitarian agencies have been evacuated. Military doctors provide the only public medical assistance. No reports are available about the current health situation and medical activities.

The situation on the side of West Timor seems to be under the control of the military and local authorities. The number of refugees in Atambua and Kupang is estimated at 55,000. It is expected that the number will increase up to 200,000 during the next days. According to testimonies, the male population was loaded onto trucks and never returned. As a result, most refugees are women and children. The army seems to have prepared the grounds by building wells and bamboo and palm frond shelters. Given the need for more housing, the authorities are building new communal shelters.

In both Atambua and Kupang, the militias display profound and violent hostility towards foreign presence. Yesterday, a UNHCR car carrying the director of their office in Kupang was attacked, destroyed and burnt. Fortunately, the director was only slightly injured.

There is for the moment no access to East Timor. The total absence of foreigners and humanitarian organisations condemns the population to abandonment by the international community and results in the absence of information on its situation and fate. The needs in health, food, water and shelter must be huge. The consequences of lack of assistance to the population could be disastrous.

Together with the Head of the Representation we met the Minister for People's Welfare and Poverty Alleviation, Prof. Haryono Suyono, who told us yesterday 8 September that they are planning to provide humanitarian assistance to the population. He assured that supply of food and basic essentials (rice, oil, etc.) were ready for distribution, but the distribution channels had collapsed.

The Minister informed that the people in both, East Timor and N.T. Timor were "emotionally against foreigners". Accordingly, the government's position was that foreigner, especially "whites", would, for the time being, not be allowed to visit Timor. Consequently, no international humanitarian organisation will be allowed to be present either in West and East Timor. For the time being, any humanitarian aid should be channel through the Indonesian authorities, according to the Minister.

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